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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of diversity of course components in the context of an online staff development course at the United Kingdom Open University. In addition to FirstClass computer conferencing and Web content, RealAudio was used in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. The purpose of its use was to add diversity and focus, which would maintain active participation until the end of the course. Following a description of the aim and components of the course, this paper presents an evaluation of its effectiveness and draws conclusions about an appropriate level of media diversity. Two figures present a snapshot of one of the audio annotations of the course materials and the opening screen of the FirstClass course area. (AEF)

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DIVERSITY IN ONLINE COURSES

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Abstract
This paper discusses the concept of diversity in the context of an online staff development course at the UK Open University. In addition to FirstClass computer conferencing and Web content, RealAudio was used in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. The purpose of its use was to add diversity and focus, which would maintain active participation until the end of the course.
After a description of the aim and components of the course, an evaluation of its effectiveness is made, and conclusions are drawn about an appropriate level of media diversity.

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It is my experience of teaching and learning that people welcome a 'varied diet' when taking courses, in order to maintain interest in the subject matter, to motivate everyone to continue to the end of the course and to appeal to different learning styles. By a varied diet, I am thinking of the following elements: both synchronous and asynchronous learning modes; the use of multiple media such as text, audio and video or visual components; and a variety of ways of interacting with the course ideas from individual study and direct feedback from the teacher to discussion with other learners and collaborative activities (Laurillard, 1993). This diversity of course components used to be the prerogative of campus-based, face-to-face teaching. Technological developments have now made this diversity possible for courses taught at a distance.

Just as technologies can and often are used 'for their own sake', so diversity in the form of multiple course components can be overdone. Students studying at a distance do not react favourably to a course which requires them to master many different media (several computer software programs, telecommunications and multimedia resources for example). They also complain when the course materials direct them, within a couple of hours of study time, to readings, then to computer activities, then back to the course materials and to a video before they can proceed with the next component (Morgan, 1989). In short, if some diversity is good, more is not necessarily better!

On the other hand, courses which are delivered primarily through one medium – say asynchronous computer conferencing – tend to have a falling off of participation. Asynchronous text messaging is a very flexible learning medium for fitting in to busy schedules, and encourages reflection and writing skills in the language of the discipline. But it is less powerful than real-time interaction as a means of motivating participants and maintaining commitment to completing the course (Mason, 1994).

After experimenting with many ways of creating a vibrant learning environment on an online asynchronous course, I came to the conclusion that real time events were the missing ingredient. This original asynchronous course, called Teaching and Learning Online, uses FirstClass computer conferencing to give trainers and educationalists hands-on experience of how to design and moderate an online course. While the 50 or so participants (spread around the UK and abroad) always start enthusiastically and work through the first two stages of the course with high levels of participation, there is always a marked dropping off of interest and interaction thereafter, despite every effort on our part as tutors and many refinements to the content of the second half of the course. Feedback from participants indicated that, as a professional updating course fitted into the spare moments around many other commitments, taking part in the course simply 'fell off the end of their list of things to do in the day' (Wegerif, 1995).

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GOING ELECTRONIC

I had the opportunity to re-think the course for staff of my own institution, the Open University (OU). As participants on the course had access to technical support and relatively powerful computers, I decided to try an online real time event at the end of the course, and to use it as the focus for drawing together all the elements of the course. In addition, I used the same technology (RealAudio) to 'annotate' the Web pages which carried the content of the course. My aim in writing the Web content was to draw together institutional experience about how to design, instigate and manage the online component of courses within the OU. Expertise in these various areas is spread widely throughout the organisation, ranging from the chair of a course team, to the course manager, tutors, administrators and systems support staff. In order to capture some of this expertise, I asked representatives of these various areas to make recordings in which I questioned them about their particular experiences of using FirstClass. These recordings were edited into 'sound bites' ranging from 2 to 5 minutes and added as audio clips (with the photograph of the speaker) to appropriate places in the Web pages. The Web pages remain as an institutional resource in addition to their use for the course. Figure One shows an extract from the materials.

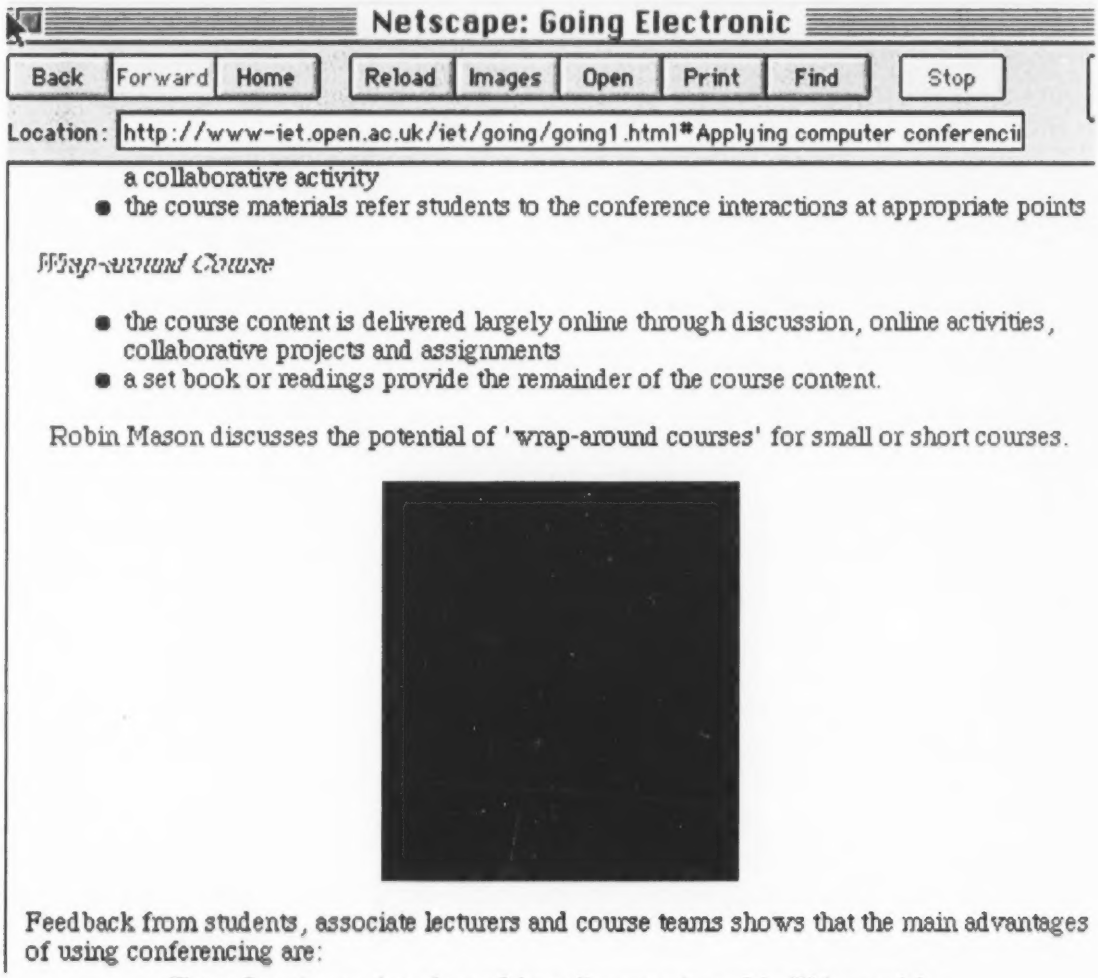
Netscape: Going Electronic
Back
Forward
Home
Reload
Images
Open
Print
Find
Stop
Location: http://www-iet.open.ac.uk/iet/going/going1.html#Applying computer conferenci
a collaborative activity
the course materials refer students to the conference interactions at appropriate points
Wrap-around Course
the course content is delivered largely online through discussion, online activities, collaborative projects and assignments
a set book or readings provide the remainder of the course content.
Robin Mason discusses the potential of 'wrap-around courses' for small or short courses.
Feedback from students, associate lecturers and course teams shows that the main advantages of using conferencing are:

Figure One: A snap shot of one of the audio annotations of the Web materials

The only paper component of the course was the following course outline which gave participants an overview of what they would be doing:

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The course will begin with a half-day face-to-face meeting at the Stony Stratford training centre. This will familiarise you with FirstClass, the Web/Real Audio, and with the other members of your group. However, the rest of the course is delivered online. Obviously you will need to have a computer which runs FirstClass and Netscape, preferably, but not necessarily, on your desk. Audio Visual will co-ordinate the RealAudio event and in principle, you can take part from the regional offices, or from various sites around Walton Hall. The course will last for 4 weeks with the following agenda:
Week One: Face-to-face meeting, training exercises in using FirstClass, online interaction with other members of your group, working through Web materials

Week Two and Three: Online debate about issues raised in the Web pages in which you will be given a role to play such as proposer or opposer of the motion, moderator of the discussion, commentor, summariser.

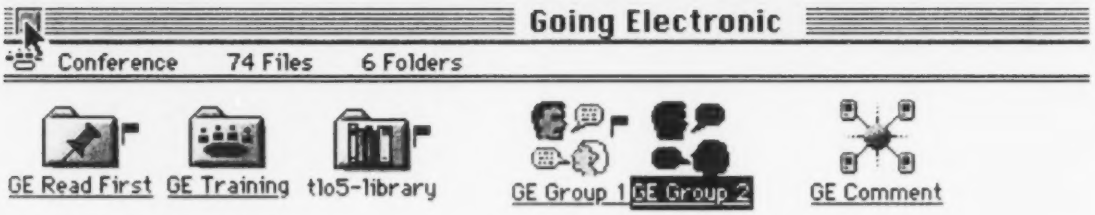
Week Four: Working in small groups online to prepare a group presentation, and participating in the RealAudio event.

I anticipate that the whole course should take between 20 and 40 hours, depending on your previous familiarity with the various media, and your commitment to all aspects of the course.

The course interactions took place on FirstClass because this is the system currently in large scale use at the OU and the course was about this use. The Web could equally well have been used – in fact, perhaps better, in that the online discussions could have been linked with the associated Web pages. Figure Two shows the opening screen of the FirstClass course area.

EVALUATION

There are three elements to the evaluation of the course:
•did the live event succeed as a motivator to keep participants engaged in the course?
•did the audio clips in the Web pages help to provide diversity on the course?
•did the combination of Web-delivered content and online interaction succeed as a useful learning environment?



	Kathleen Stredder	1K	re REal Audio Event	27/2/97	4:41 p
	Jennifer Harding	1K	Re(4): Friday's event	26/2/97	9:41 p
	Tony Kaye	2K	Re(3): Friday's event	26/2/97	9:24 p
	barbara Hodgson	2K	Re(2): Friday's event	26/2/97	2:02 p
	Pat McCarthy	1K	Re: Friday's event	26/2/97	11:01
	Robin Mason	3K	Friday's event	26/2/97	9:43 a
	Jim Iley	2K	Week 4 Activities	24/2/97	2:21 p
	Janet Collins	3K	Welcome Jennifer	24/2/97	10:06
	Jennifer Harding	3K	Kathleen and Janet's discussi	19/2/97	9:28 p
	Robin Mason	3K	Re(2): E901	18/2/97	10:38
	Janet Collins	3K	Re: E901	18/2/97	9:11 a
	Kathleen Stredder	2K	E901	17/2/97	6:21 p
	Janet Collins	2K	Re(4): Making the technology	17/2/97	4:12 p
	Peter Twining	2K	Re(3): Making the technology	17/2/97	2:36 p
	Janet Collins	2K	Re(2): Making the technology	17/2/97	11:54
	Tony Kaye	17K	Fwd: The Net benefits of lear	17/2/97	11:49
	Robin Mason	2K	Re: Histories and people on o	14/2/97	10:31
	Janet Maybin	1K	Group 2 fedback on conference	13/2/97	3:39 p
	Ian Oram	1K	Re: Histories and people on o	13/2/97	3:09 p

Figure Two: Going Electronic, an OU staff development course

RealAudio Event

The course concluded with a one hour 'audiographic' event, in which participants went to particular locations on campus, or used the machine on their desk if it was powerful enough and they had already downloaded the RealAudio software. Participants heard three short presentations summarising the online interactions, and followed a Netscape screen of prepared overheads. They could send an email question or comment at any time and could also view all those submitted by the other participants. The final half hour of the event was an informal discussion by the three presenters about the comments submitted by email during the event. Both the presentations and the comments continue to be viewable and audible from the same site as an asynchronous resource.

Without any prompting, I received the following feedback from one of the participants who had managed to set up RealAudio on her own machine:

> I had a meeting at 10 so was too late to hear Peter [the first presenter]. So thank you for the brilliant idea of a replay and I could also stop the tape and make notes. You were riveting (perhaps you had your eyes closed and so could see us all in front of you). Peter was also excellent - I liked his boings. [telling the audience to move to the next overhead!]. The value of this event seems to me to lie in how well the presenters summed up. It doesn't matter that more questions are raised than answered. The questions and observations from you and Peter have given me a sense of a conclusion to the course and the beginning of my investigations of real conferencing. The event has also provided me with more motivation and given clarity to the issues to be solved.
> Many thanks, again

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And from another participant who was unable to attend the live event:

> I'm afraid I won't have any time on Friday to participate in the RealAudio event....I'm very disappointed as I should like to have learnt how to set up a real audio page on the web (and also of course to have properly finished the GE experience - which I have thoroughly enjoyed....so thank you!). I feel rather frustrated, because the course will fizzle out for me and there will be no proper endings, either to the Group 1 conference or to GE.....oh well.....I have learnt a lot, and am thoroughly converted to the use of conferences in course provision....thank you very much for your guidance.

As tutor, I also felt that the live event concluded the course in a more positive way than I have ever experienced with previous online courses. There was a greater sense of momentum building up to the event, and, although not all of the staff who 'signed up' for the course actually participated, those who did remained active until the end.

Audio clips

The fact that quite a few participants did not make the effort to get to a machine where they could hear the audio clips indicates that perhaps this was one diversity too many! I did receive some very valuable feedback from one participant about how the sound bites should differ from the Web text materials:

> Having experienced the elation of actually managing to listen to the audio sequences, here are some comments about how I reacted to them and how useful I found them.
>
> 1 Applying computer conferencing to the OU context
> I liked the Web notes; they gave a succinct point by point resumé of the benefits and uses of CMC and CML. However, I thought the audio clips did not give added value except (i) in Gary's case to mention the use of a practise conference and of maintaining a rich and lively environment for the students, (ii) in Robin's case the mean's by which courses can maintain up-to-datedness and (iii) in Gilly's case to use the medium holding academic and student support objectives to the fore.
>
> 2 Integrating conferences with other course components
> Again, I found these notes to be useful, but wasn't particularly interested in the information being given by the audio clip.....however, the clip did begin to give me a feel for how the medium could be put to use within a course context.
>
> 3 Preparing Associate Lecturers
> Once more the notes provided valuable points to be aware of in designing a course that will involve conferencing. Gilly's comments on training Associate Lecturers were quite useful but too general....I wanted to know more about the content of the training course.
> This is where I could see how to use the audio clip could provide a different medium for conveying information.....the notes contain some very detailed points and I was beginning to sag a bit at reading them...but I could listen to someone telling me some more specific points....However, I realise some lighter relief from the detail also helps....it just seems to me that all the clips so far have tended to the light relief side of things.
> Nick's first clip reiterated some of the points in the notes, but it was worth hearing how they tried to tackle some of the problems...unfortunately the clip finished just as he was about to describe how the course team have tried to overcome the issue of time management...I'd liked to have heard this.
> His second clip was spot on.....I especially found his warnings helpful...not to overuse the facility to post stop presses etc., for the course team to beware of the disproportionate weight given to their opinion.
>
> 4 Technical considerations
> Now this is where I found the audio clips coming into their own. Apart from Pete Thomas' contribution, which, because of its historical bias and therefore lack of relevant information (even in a generalist sense), I found of little value, all the clips here gave information that was ONLY

accessible via audio, i.e. they were not repeating the text, nor were they of a purely general nature. I paid much more attention to these than I had to any of the previous clips.

5 Student considerations
To my surprise, given my comments above about using audio for generalist contributions, I found Robin's clip worked well. This seems just the place to use such contributions....at the beginning as an intro.

6 Conference structures and conference futures
Yet again, I found the first contribution, by Nick, of little value because it simply repeated the text. Tina's contribution mixed information presented in the text with new ideas...OK, but I found it difficult to maintain interest throughout. Nick's second contribution was much better, because it introduced new information only through the audio clip, and Pete's contribution on delivering a computer conferenced tutorial in real time was again valuable because the info could not be found in the text. Gary's contribution lacked interest because it was simply wallpaper, and Nick's third clip simply reiterated the text on critical mass....a process that you might have gathered by now I have come to dislike. However, Ben's discourse on the Off Line Reader in Conferencing Futures was excellent, again because she was passing on important detailed comment about the merits (or otherwise) of the system and because this also could not be found in the text. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I found this the most useful of all the audio clips on these pages.

I will certainly be more careful in any future audio annotations I make, that the content of the audio develops, enlivens or details the information in the Web text. Merely confirming what the text says, even if the confirmation is by a known expert, does not justify the use of another medium. While I was aiming for a 'fireside chat' feeling to the audio clips, I can see that the chat needs more scripting than I realised first time around.

Web Content and Online Interaction

In Stage Two of the course, where the group was divided in half, each with a different topic to discuss, participants were invited to use the Web materials as a foundation for their arguments for or against the particular question posed as the focus of discussion. In one of the groups, each participant was assigned a specific role (and several of these required the participant to refer to the Web materials); in the other group, participants were free to interact in whatever way they chose. As our previous experience with these two extremes has confirmed time and time again, a structured environment works much better: people get on with the task they have been assigned and most members of the group are active participants (Mason, 1997). Their concern about letting the group down overcomes their inhibitions about participating and the designation of a role helps them to focus on a particular form of input.

The 'free-for-all' method, on the other hand, often leads to one-sided discussions between a few enthusiastic participants. Others soon feel they don't want to intrude in the two or three way conversation and they either watch or drop out.

In the case of Going Electronic, the 'structured' group did make many references to the Web materials, often quoting or paraphrasing extracts, while the unstructured group never referred to them. This is not to say that their discussions were irrelevant, but merely that, from the point of view of a course aiming to convey a certain body of information, a tight framework needs to be in place to integrate the content with the discussion of it.

CONCLUSION

I am satisfied myself that the experiment in using RealAudio was worthwhile; that is, worth the extra effort of staff in supporting and taking part in it. Novelty, I realise, may be playing a role in this perception. Online courses are not new for me, whereas designing audio clips and a RealAudio event certainly were. However, the greater commitment of many (though not all) participants up to the end of the course does confirm my hunch that real time events do add an important ingredient to online courses.

On such a short course as this (four weeks) I perhaps went overboard in the diversity offered to participants. Learning to use FirstClass, accessing Web pages, taking part in online discussions and attending a face-to-face event at the beginning and a RealAudio event at the end, was enough 'diversity' for a staff development course which was added onto all the usual job and domestic commitments. The technical barriers of getting RealAudio working on their desktop, or taking the time to go to a machine where the software was already installed, was one too many demands. However, the great thing about these technologies is that the resources and materials created for them continue to be available long after the formal course is finished.

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Note: As the Web materials and the RealAudio event were produced only for internal OU staff, the url to the Web site is not for public use.